



Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1871-1954)

'New occasions teach new duties; time makes ancient good uncouth.' Joseph Rowntree, confectioner and philanthropist, liked to quote these lines by the American poet James Russell Lowell. Joseph's second son, Seebohm, followed closely in his father's footsteps and became a world-renowned innovator in business management and champion of the poor, unemployed, homeless, and old people. In these roles he was a significant influence behind the founders of the welfare state and industrial democracy.

Little is known about Seebohm the man, as he famously burnt his papers shortly before his move to Hughenden Manor in Buckinghamshire (ironically, given his Liberal and Quaker heritage, to the former home of Benjamin Disraeli). But the titles of his works are a sure sign of the continued relevance of many social questions still being debated today. For example: *The Human Factor in Business, The Human Needs of Labour, We can Conquer Unemployment, Industrial Unrest, Mixed Farming and Muddled Thinking, How Shall we Think of Society and Human Relations?, The Present State of the Housing Problem, A Survey on the Problems of Ageing and the Care of Old People.*

Though a shadowy figure in modern British history, by his work in linking Poverty, Social Policy, and Business Efficiency, and working at the heart of government through two World Wars, Seebohm Rowntree has come to be regarded as one of the major pioneers in the shaping of modern Britain.

POVERTY STUDIES

Rowntree's ground-breaking work *Poverty a Study of Town Life* (1901) became a classic in the emerging field of empirical sociology. Data was gathered from 11,560 households containing 46,754 people in 388 streets – a total of 2/3 of York's inhabitants. The interviewers asked questions about rent, the number of residents

*Spotlighting Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree,
key architect of the welfare state and industrial democracy,
and champion of the poor.
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in each household, access to a water tap, diet and other personal details. What Rowntree showed with this research was that just under 10% were in primary poverty (insufficient earnings for the necessities of life) and a further 18% were in secondary poverty (where some portion was spent in other expenditure or wasted – e.g. drink, betting or gambling). Over half those living in primary poverty were in regular work, but their wages too low to maintain their family. Rowntree also defined what we now know as the cycle of poverty – importantly helping to demolish the idea that poverty was invariably the fault of the poor. From his research Rowntree was able to develop and define the notion of the Poverty Line, and determine how much a family needed to earn to live above that line.

LIBERAL REFORMS

Winston Churchill said in 1901 that *Poverty* was a book that had fairly made his hair stand on end. ‘Although the British Empire is so large, the poor cannot find room to live in it...this festering life at home makes world-wide power a mockery.’ ... ‘I see little glory in an Empire which can rule the waves and is unable to flush its sewers’.

Social investigations such as Rowntree’s subsequently prompted a range of Liberal welfare reforms covering Pensions, National Insurance, Free school meals and Rural affairs.

Rowntree was an intimate of Prime Minister Lloyd George. He served as director of the welfare department of the Ministry of Munitions, and in the national post-war Reconstruction Committee. Their strong relationship culminated in their joint authorship of the pamphlet, *How to Tackle Unemployment*, 1930.

SCIENTIFIC BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

Joseph and Seebohm Rowntree introduced a range of pioneering welfare benefits for the Rowntree & Co workforce, such as a works dentist, retirement pension, widow’s benefit, and a central works council – all putting into practice what Seebohm outlined in his famous works *The Human Needs of Labour* and the *Human Factor in Business*. He also pioneered psychological profiling and market research within the new tradition of scientific business management.

‘Business has a soul, it is not a mechanical thing but a living and worthy part of the social organism. It is not an end in itself, but a means to an end and that end is the well being of the whole community.’

‘Industry is a human thing in which men and women earn the means of life, and from which men and women are entitled to expect the means to a life worth living.’

‘The real goal for an employer is to try and seek for others the fullest life of which an individual is capable.’

‘Whatever may be the motives which induce any given individual to engage in industry its true basic purpose must be the service of the community.’

THE LIVING WAGE

A letter written in 10 Downing Street in 1916 shows Rowntree’s closeness to the heart of government and his involvement in a debate, first begun by the Fabians in the 1890s, calling for a national minimum wage.

Later he wrote: 'The first step to take in fixing minimum wages is to ascertain the human needs of the workers. We can then discuss the cost of providing for them.'

INTERNATIONALISM

In his writings Seebohm Rowntree uses comparative data for example from Belgium and Scandinavia to draw a picture of his social and economic findings at home, e.g. on land tax, housing and leisure.

His influence abroad was significant. He visited Japan in 1924, where his name is still held in high esteem today. He frequently made lecture tours to America, of which he wrote in 1921 'America still remains the land of opportunity. A sense of growth - vigorous, feverish growth - forces itself upon one ... Immigration, "a great foreign invasion", is an enormous source of wealth and capacity. The American industrialist is more alert; he has more "pep"'.

EDUCATION FOR LIFE

Education was a life-long concern for Seebohm as for other members of his Quaker family. Adult schools, local schools, libraries, and the principle of education for life were at the heart of his involvement, that was always informed by his religious faith.

'Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap' is a law from which there is no escape. Ignore the spiritual life of the nation, and what is left? Only selfish material ends, and selfishness is at the root of every social and industrial evil from which the world suffers.'

HUMAN RELATIONS AND PERSONNEL MANAGEMENT

In 1913 Seebohm Rowntree chaired the first meeting of the Welfare Workers' Association, with delegates from companies including Boots, Cadbury, and Chivers. The first minute book records states that 'it was decided to form an Association of Employers interested in industrial betterment and of welfare workers engaged by them'. This was the beginnings of the Institute of Personnel Management, later CIPD.

ROWNTREE AND FOUR WOMEN

Lady Florence Bell wrote *At the Works* in 1907, a study of working-class industrial life in Middlesbrough in the tradition of Charles Booth and Seebohm Rowntree.

Beatrice Webb said of Rowntree that he was 'an invaluable individual...eager to spend his time and money in working up special subjects...[but] too modest and hesitating in opinion to lead a committee.'

Nancy Astor, an American and the first woman to sit as an MP in the House of Commons, was a friend of Rowntree's and visited him in his home in York in 1920.

The American 'Mother of Modern Management', Mary Parker Follett, said one of the best speeches she ever heard was by Seebohm Rowntree in York. 'This firm has found a way of making its employees share in a common purpose...co-partners in a common enterprise.'

MASS OBSERVATION

Rowntree was one of the pioneers of large-scale cohort studies of British life. He invited Tom Harrisson, the founder of Mass Observation - the social research organisation aimed to record everyday life in Britain - to collect data on gambling.

But Rowntree's bestselling *English Life and Leisure* (1951), co-authored with G.R. Lavers, was not without its critics, as suggested by a review in the 'The Times' that noted its moralising tone and vivid case studies, while welcoming the authors' prediction of a decline in church attendance and spiritual decay and its likely impact on society.

Rowntree's study of English social life was followed in 1957 by another seminal work in similar vein, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy: Apects of English Working Class Life*.

SEEBOHM ROWNTREE'S LEGACY

'The proper legacy of Seebohm Rowntree is closely related to his own inheritance - critical and painstaking social research by groups of people of different persuasions and different interests, all sharing a genuine independence of mind.' (Asa Briggs, 1961)

'Shining an honest light on reality in the poorest parts of our society is an important contribution that today's researchers, following in Seebohm Rowntree's footsteps, can continue to make.' (John Hills, 2004)

'Living standards may have improved considerably since the 1920s, but we are still asking how workers can share in the prosperity generated by businesses while protecting productivity and profit. The Rowntrees showed us that a decent standard of living for all is essential if an economy is to grow in the long term, and that better-paid workers can contribute more to business success.' (Julia Unwin 2016)

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information, visit the Rowntree Society's website www.rowntreesociety.org.uk. The 360 installation will shortly be available on the Rowntree Society's website in a film version.

The Rowntree Society is a registered charity based in York that was founded in 2001 to further knowledge about the lives and legacy of the extraordinary Rowntree family over several generations. It acts as an information point, puts people in touch with each other, and advises on new projects and initiatives locally as well as nationally.

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Bridget Morris, Executive Director, The Rowntree Society

